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ABSTRACT

Sociolinguistic patterns among German immigrants to the United States of America are examined in this paper. Earlier studies in this area, including Wolfgang Viereck's work published in "Orbis" in 1967 and 1968, are examined. Through an analysis of the immigration patterns of the citizens of Glarus, Switzerland, in 1845 to New Glarus, Wisconsin, the author reveals reasons for the decline in community interest in maintaining the Swiss German dialect of the original settlers as the mother tongue. (RL)

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On the German Language in America

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Compared with Spanish and the American Indian languages German has not played a conspicuous role in the linguistic history of the Rocky Mountain area, but, taking the United States as a whole, German was for a long period in terms of numbers the leading non-English language. The United States census shows that in 1910, when the German-speaking element in the population was at its largest, there were nearly nine million inhabitants of the United States who were either foreign-born with a German mother tongue or native-born of German-speaking foreign-born parents. In 1960, when different categories were used in the census, the figure was probably around four million.[1] This represented a considerable drop in a period of fifty years, but the number of speakers of German is still appreci-

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able. In colonial times the major center of settlement was in Pennsylvania. Nineteenth and twentieth century immigration led to large urban groups in New York, California and other states and to many urban and rural settlements in Texas, the midwestern states and further west.

In this paper I will briefly consider the studies that have been made of American German, give some details of my own research in Wisconsin and suggest a few possibilities for further study. On looking through the bibliography of American German that Wolfgang Viereck compiled and published in Orbis in 1967 and 1968,[2] it might seem that there has been no lack of studies of the German spoken and written in North America. Viereck lists well over 300 works dealing with German in the United States and Canada and the number has increased since then. Yet this number is relatively small in view of the great number and variety of German groups and the rapid decline of the speaking of German in this century. There is without doubt an urgent need for many more recordings of American German. Ideally the recordings would be made according to an overall plan, such as that proposed by Gilbert in 1968,[3] but since in practice such a plan presents many

difficulties, any work done is valuable. Apart from illustrating the development of the different forms of German in America, areas where German and English are spoken provide a linguistic laboratory for the study of bilingualism and language contact.

Most of the work done up to the present time has dealt with relatively well-established communities, usually in rural areas, where German has been retained for two generations or more. It has ranged from popular accounts and word lists to detailed linguistic studies such as those that exist for Pennsylvania German and Texas German. Not surprisingly, in view of the age and the size of the settlement, Pennsylvania German has received the most attention. In fact, nearly sixty percent of the titles listed by Viereck deal with it. Texas German, of which there are around 70,000 speakers, has also been well studied in recent years. Wisconsin is a third region with a major concentration of German-speakers. It has been estimated that at the turn of the century a third of the population was able to speak or at least to understand German.[4] Unlike the comparatively homogeneous German areas of Pennsylvania and Texas, the German settlement in Wisconsin comprises a large number of individual communi-

ties using different dialects of German.

In recent years I have studied the German spoken in one of these settlements. New Glarus, Wisconsin, is some twenty-five miles southwest of Madison in southwestern Wisconsin and was founded in 1845 by immigrants who had left the alpine Swiss canton of Glarus because of severe economic difficulties. Immigration from Glarus continued until the eighteen-eighties and in later years smaller numbers from other Swiss cantons, especially Canton Berne, settled there. Today probably around one third of the nearly two thousand inhabitants in the area of New Glarus are of Swiss origin. The region has become well-known for dairy-farming and the production of Swiss cheese. The Swiss German dialect of these immigrants has been one of the last aspects of their Swiss culture to survive the almost inevitable process of Americanization. Unlike some others, this community made no attempt to remain separate from American society. Swiss German was reported as still being the language of everyday communication in the village at the beginning of this century, some fifty years after the founding of the settlement, but since then it has grad-

ually been replaced by English. Some of the major factors in the decline were, here as elsewhere, the loss of early isolation, the influence of the schools, intermarriage with other nationalities and simply the lack of a need for two languages. In the families whose ancestors settled in the area in the last century the dialect is now used only by speakers of the middle and older generations when talking to friends and acquaintances and by very few of those under forty, although they may understand it. English, which many of the older generation learned only in school as a second language, is now the language of everyday communication. It is clear that some time in the near future Swiss German will no longer be spoken here except by a few recent immigrants from Switzerland.

In studying this Swiss colony, I have concentrated on the development of the Glarus dialect. The study is based on data collected and recorded in Wisconsin in 1966, 1967 and 1972 and in Glarus, Switzerland, in 1968-1969. To obtain comparable data from informants in New Glarus I used the Wisconsin German Questionnaire, a collection of some seven hundred sentences compiled by Lester W. J. Seifert, which are translated by the informant into his dialect. It was

supplemented by a smaller New Glarus questionnaire and a considerable body of free conversation, stories and reminiscences. The language of twenty-eight speakers was recorded. All were born and had lived all their lives in the area. The ancestors of some were among the first settlers in the region. All spoke English fluently.

Here I will discuss one aspect of the influence exerted by English on this Swiss dialect. Borrowing is to be found at all levels of the language, phonological, grammatical and lexical, but, as is usually the case, is most evident in the lexicon. This English influence, while very noticeable to the native Swiss, has not affected the structure of the language significantly. The major categories into which lexical influence is traditionally divided are the importation of foreign words, the use of native words with foreign meanings and combinations of these two processes. This change in the vocabulary, the Great Vocabulary Shift as Haugen called it for American Norwegian, is, of course, the result of the settlers' need to give names to the new phenomena and experiences that confronted them in their new environment and is therefore most often found in semantic fields such as farming, the house

and home, food, travel, government. In New Glarus, farming, which had not played a major role in the native country, is the area most affected by English terminology. For example, the settlers no longer lived on a puurehoof as in Switzerland but on a Farm, which was no doubt so called because of its much larger size. The farmer was no longer a puur but a Farmer. A new verb farmere described his activities. The growing of grain was not well-known in Canton Glarus. The idea of the crop itself, Khrap, was felt to be new. Native terms were retained for rye, Rokke, barley, Geerschte, and wheat, Wäize, but Chore, which in Switzerland had denoted cereals in general, acquired the meaning 'corn'. This is a change which has perhaps occurred in all Germanic languages in the United States. After harvesting the grain was stored in a Greeneri or Säilo (or Sylo).

Most loanwords are nouns. They outnumber verbs four to one in the data collected. Borrowed adjectives are rare. The most common are redi 'ready' and plenti 'plenty'. The importation of loanwords occurs more frequently than substitution, which involves the change in meaning of a native form on the model of a foreign one. Chalt, the native adjective 'cold' became also a noun with the meaning 'common

cold' on the model of its English counterpart. Gleser, which was formerly only the plural of Glaas '(drinking) glass', now also means 'spectacles'. Fuess 'foot', which originally denoted only a part of the body, is now also the American unit of measure. Forms of Standard German gleichen 'to resemble' have generally undergone a change in meaning to 'to like' in North America. The cause of the change is most probably a confusion of English to like and to be like. The Glarus form of the word, glyche, also now has the new meaning. The distinction between informal and formal second person pronouns, which Swiss German shares with Standard German, has been lost in New Glarus. Du, like the English you, is the form of the pronoun in all cases in the singular, a usage which has sometimes caused surprise when residents of New Glarus visit Switzerland.

Loan translations, a reproduction in native words of an English model, are another type of substitution found in New Glarus, e.g. Bettzimmer 'bedroom', quet aab 'well off'. Hybrid loans combine importation and substitution, e.g. Freemhuus 'frame house', Öpfelphäi 'apple pie'. Hybrid creations, like hybrid loans consist of a native and an imported morpheme, but differ in having no English model. Tschoorsne 'to do the chores', which is formed from

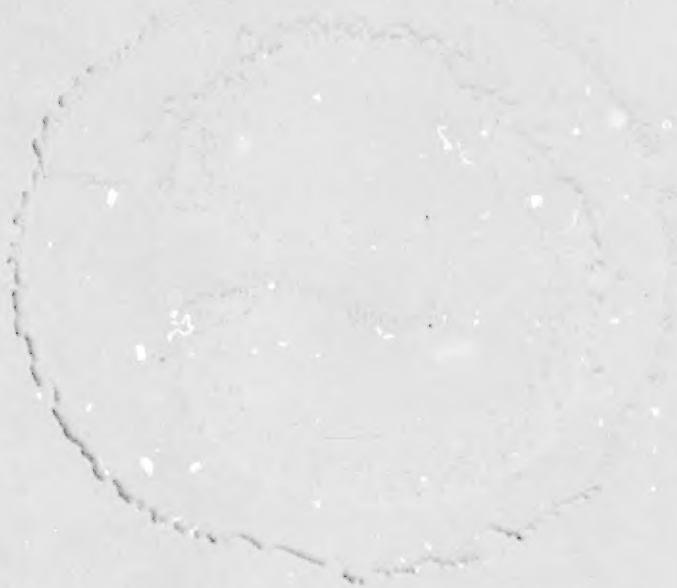
the loanword Tschoors 'chores' and the native verbal suffix -ne, has no English counterpart.

American German language studies have not been restricted to Pennsylvania, Texas and Wisconsin. Viereck lists descriptions from more than fifteen different states, mainly in the Midwest. Towards the west, Kansas is represented with three titles, South Dakota with two, Nebraska with one. The German of Oklahoma has subsequently been recorded and studied. But there seems to have been no survey or examination of the German spoken in the Rocky Mountain area. In the past there was certainly sufficient material for study. For example, in Colorado, one of the major influxes of immigrants was that of Russian-Germans, the descendants of Germans who moved to Russia as colonists in the latter part of the eighteenth century at the invitation of Catherine the Great and who later came to North America and settled in the western states. Other Germans were prominent in Colorado in the early days of settlement and their numbers are reflected in the thirty-two German newspapers which have been published at one time or another, if only for a short time, in Colorado. A pointer to the present situation is given by the figures of the United States census for

1970, according to which the somewhat surprising total of over 77,000 United States-born inhabitants of Colorado named German as their mother tongue. Many of these are, of course, the children of recent immigrants. Whether what remains of the older German-speaking groups in Colorado is worth more than a cursory examination remains to be determined. I hope in the near future to make a survey in Colorado.

Finally, there is a kind of bilingualism different from the almost static variety found in established German-speaking enclaves like New Glarus. This is the dynamic bilingualism of recent immigrants, of which one major characteristic is that it shows considerable variation. As far as German is concerned, the study of this kind of bilingualism has been neglected in the United States. An examination of the changes in the German of recent immigrants over a period of years and how this is related to their progress in English would provide an index to their linguistic adjustment and an understanding of their integration into American society. Since around 16,000 foreign-born inhabitants of Colorado have German as their mother tongue according to the 1970 census, there is plenty of material at hand in this state alone. This kind of study may not be so ur-

gent as the study of settlement German, but it would be an equally significant undertaking.



[1] Further details are to be found in Heinz Kloss, "German-American Language Maintenance Efforts," in Language Loyalty in the United States, ed. Joshua A. Fishman et al. (The Hague: Mouton, 1966), pp. 213-214.

[2] "German Dialects Spoken in the United States and Canada and Problems of German-English Language Contact especially in North America: a Bibliography," Orbis, 16 (1967), 549-56[illegible] and 17 (1968), 532-535.

[3] Glenn G. Gilbert, "A Unified Proposal for the Study of the German Language in America," in The German Language in America: a Symposium, ed. Glenn G. Gilbert (Austin: Univ. of Texas Press, 1971), pp. 128-135.

[4] Jürgen Eichhoff, "German in Wisconsin," in Gilbert, pp. 48-49.